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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 002391

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ES](#) [IZ](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: RETURNING TROOPS RELATE POSITIVE
EXPERIENCE IN IRAQ

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler, Reason 1.4 (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Having been relieved by a fifth rotation of troops deployed to Iraq in support of coalition forces, El Salvador's fourth contingent returned to El Salvador August 24-25. Notwithstanding the loss of one of their comrades in a non-combat-related incident, the troops related generally positive experiences to a pollster with the nation's leading daily. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) The fourth rotation of El Salvador's Cuscatlan Battalion began arriving home August 24, having been relieved by the fifth contingent. The fourth battalion's sole fatal casualty was the non-combat-related June 27 death in a traffic accident of Carlos Amando Godoy Castro. Including the fifth rotation of 380 recently-arrived troops in Iraq, approximately 1,900 Salvadoran troops--nearly 15 percent of its total armed forces--are now veterans of frontline experience in the field, with the benefit of having operated state-of-the-art military technology in conjunction with modern armed forces such as those of the United States and United Kingdom.

3. (U) Leading daily "La Prensa Grafica" conducted a poll among "Cuscatlan IV" soldiers shortly before their departure from Iraq. Some 83 percent of those interviewed characterized their experiences in Iraq as either "Very Good" or "Good", with only one of 30 respondents indicating that his time in Iraq had been a "Bad" experience. Approximately 77 percent of those interviewed outlined that the worst problem they faced while in Iraq related to difficulties in language and communication. (Note: El Salvador is the only remaining Spanish-speaking nation with troops in Iraq, and the Cuscatlan Battalion is deployed as part of an international brigade, under Polish command, at a base where eight languages are spoken. End note.) Twenty-two of 30 interviewees said that, having now experienced military service in Iraq, they would do the same thing over again, and 93 percent were of the view that the "Salvadoran presence was necessary in Hilla" (the city in Babylon province in which they were deployed). Not surprisingly, 70 percent of those polled identified their families as what they missed most while overseas.

4. (C) COMMENT: The degree to which Salvadoran soldiers portray their experiences in Iraq in an upbeat light is somewhat surprising, given the constant danger of attack and the privations that a military camp in the desert entail. (Note: During the fourth contingent's February-to-August deployment, daily maximum temperatures in the Hilla area reached as high as 131 degrees Fahrenheit. End note.) Their positive experiences, together with the absence of more serious combat casualties, help lessen President Saca's exposure to one of his only political vulnerabilities--his unpopular dispatch of Salvadoran troops in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. END COMMENT.
Barclay